



House Select Committee on Homeland Security Democrats

JIM TURNER, Ranking Member

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At a hearing today of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, "Towards a National Biodefense Strategy," Congressman Jim Turner, Ranking Member of the Committee, made the following statement.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

And thanks to the witnesses, Dr. Albright, and Dr. Fauci, welcome back. We look forward to hearing updates from you. General Martinez and Dr. Raub, it's a pleasure to see you before this Committee.

I also want to thank Dr. Shelly Hearne, who will appear before us later today, to give her perspective on our biodefense preparedness, as well as Dr. Anna Johnson-Winegar (pronounced "WIN-A-GER"), who has years of experience as a researcher and administrator of biological defense programs.

Almost exactly one year ago, this Committee held hearings on the Project Bioshield legislation. Following such consideration, we, along with our House colleagues, subsequently moved quickly to approve the bill and send it to the Senate. Its final passage out of that body two weeks ago is long overdue. The fact that this bill has not yet been scheduled for a final vote in the House should be seen as just another sign that we have lost the sense of urgency for protecting the homeland that we originally had in the wake of September 11 and the anthrax attacks. This sense of urgency is something we need to regain. Our terrorist enemies are still capable, and still looking for opportunities to attack the homeland again. That is why we must do all we can, as fast as we can, to make America as safe as it needs to be.

Fortunately, we have made some progress in preparing our nation to combat a bioterrorism attack. We do have a large strategic national stockpile of antibiotics and medical supplies. Public servants such as Dr. Fauci at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases have been hard at work developing some of the many new vaccines, drugs, and diagnostic devices we need to defend against bioterrorism. The Department of Homeland Security has deployed new sensors to detect airborne pathogens in major cities across America. And the Department of Defense has long made the protection of troops from chemical and biological weapons a priority of its research and procurement programs.

But despite this good news, there is abundant evidence that much more needs to be done. We need to move faster protect the homeland from the threat of bioterrorism than we are today. Let me offer a few examples:

- It took two-and-a-half years after the anthrax attacks for the Administration to develop a strategy for bioterrorism. But this plan only sets broad strategic goals and assigns tasks to specific agencies. What we need, however, is a plan that identifies specific objectives, establishes timeframes for achieving these objectives, allocates resources, and clearly defines the roles of federal, state, and local agencies in bioterrorism prevention, preparedness and response.

- Second, we still have not secured U.S. stocks of dangerous pathogens and the laboratories that house them, despite a requirement to do so under the 2002 Bioterrorism Preparedness Act. While expanded research is essential to improving our biodefense, it also brings more opportunities for the accidental or intentional escape of pathogens from legitimate facilities. The Administration should fully implement the select agent regulations mandated by Congress as soon as possible.
- While we have enough smallpox vaccine for every man, woman, and child in the nation, it is an open question whether we could vaccinate our population quickly enough if a smallpox outbreak occurred. The Administration's goal of vaccinating 500,000 health care workers and first responders has not been met, and forty percent of states report that they are unable to vaccinate their populations within ten days of an outbreak. The National Smallpox Vaccination program has failed, and it is unclear how the Administration is attempting to meet the goals it announced when the vaccination effort was launched.
- In addition to deficiencies in smallpox preparedness, the Trust for America's Health reports that only two states are actually prepared to distribute the supplies that currently reside in the national strategic stockpile. To prepare our nation for a bioterror attack, every state and community in the country should have detailed plans outlining how the necessary medicines will be transported, where medicines will be distributed, and who will be operating distribution centers. I do believe that sufficient planning has been done.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, we need to acknowledge that while Project BioShield is a good first step, it is unlikely to provide the full range of countermeasures we need to defend this nation. We must take steps to ensure that the private sector – and if necessary, the federal government – can rapidly produce the countermeasures we need to combat unknown, resistant, or bioengineered pathogens that could be used against us in a bioterror attack.

That is why I, along with 34 other co-sponsors, recently introduced H.R. 4258, the RAPID Cures Act, to begin the process of building a national capability to respond more quickly to bioterrorism threats. The legislation recognizes that it may never be possible to produce every medical countermeasure we need through Project Bioshield, and that the growing power of biotechnology can render a pathogen like anthrax or smallpox immune to the vaccines and drugs we do have. We need to develop the mechanisms to go from “bug” to “drug” – or the identification of a pathogen to the development of a countermeasure to combat it – in as little as a few months, or even weeks. Personally, I cannot think of another research goal that would bring more benefits to the security and health of the entire world than this one. I am interested in hearing from our witnesses on this proposal.

Mr. Chairman, bioterrorism is arguably the most significant threat we face. I thank you again for calling this hearing today to examine how best to move towards a bioterrorism strategy for the nation.

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